

SENTENCE SKILLS:

Correcting Run-ons, Fused Sentences, Comma Splices and Sentence Fragments

In order to have your writing read correctly and understood, you need to learn good sentence skills, how to recognize when and where to punctuate and be able to avoid some common writing errors. You probably remember that every sentence needs a subject and a verb. Who or what is doing something in the sentence is called the subject and what the sentence says about the subject is called the verb. When sentences are simple, it is easier to recognize the subject and the verb. Example: The people voted. We can tell that the subject is people and the verb is voted, however, sometimes as we write we make sentence skill errors through oversight or an assumption that what we have written makes sense without remembering to check for these basic parts of the sentence.

One of the most common writing mistakes is using **run-on** sentences. A run-on sentence occurs when two sentences are run together with no adequate sign given to mark the break in between. Sometimes the run-on sentences are called **fused sentences**. These are two sentences that run together with no punctuation mark to show the break between them. They are fused or joined together as if they were one thought. An example of a fused sentence is: That book was interesting I read it quickly. To correct this fused sentence, you would need to show adequate punctuation between the two independent clauses—That book was interesting I read it quickly. Each of these independent clauses is a complete thought. Use a period or a semicolon to punctuate between the two independent clauses: That book was interesting. I read it quickly. Or That book was interesting; I read it quickly. Now the sentences are not fused and each independent clause has appropriate punctuation.

Another common sentence skill mistake is called a **comma splice**. This is a run-on sentence that has a comma used incorrectly as punctuation between two independent clauses. An example of a comma splice is: The chain on my bicycle likes to chew up my pants, it leaves grease marks on my ankle as well.

There is a pause between the two independent clauses, but it is not the place to put a comma. To correct this comma splice mistake, you would need to place a semi-colon between the two independent clauses. Example: The chain on my bicycle likes to chew up my pants; it leaves grease marks on my ankle as well. Another way to correct this comma splice mistake would be to place a period in place of the comma and capitalize the first letter of the second independent clause. The chain on my bicycle likes to chew up my pants. It likes to leave grease marks on my ankle as well.

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Another way of correcting a run-on sentence or comma splice is to use a comma plus a joining word to connect the two complete thoughts. Joining words (called conjunctions) include and, but, or, for, nor, so and yet. For example, in the above comma splice sentence, you could add a comma and a conjunction instead of just the comma to correct the sentence. Example: The chain on my bicycle likes to chew up my pants, **and** it likes to leave grease marks on my ankle as well.

Another problem students may have is not being able to identify sentence fragments. Every sentence must have a subject and a verb and must express a complete thought. A word group that does not have a subject or a verb and that does not express a complete thought is a sentence fragment.

An example of a **sentence fragment** could be any word group that begins with a dependent-word fragment. Some common dependent words are: *after, although, because, before, if, that, unless when, whenever, where, wherever, whether, which, while, who, whoever and whose*. When you see sentences that start with such dependent words, you must be careful that a fragment does not result. An example of a dependent-word sentence fragment is: **After** I learned the price of the dress. I decided to wear something I had in my closet. To correct this dependent-word fragment mistake, you would need to connect the dependent clause (After I learned the price of the dress) to the independent word group (I decided to wear something I had in my closet). You can do this by combining the two clauses and adding a comma between the dependent and independent clauses. Example: After I learned the price of the dress, I decided to wear something I had in my closet.

Another common sentence fragment type is one that occurs when an ing- word appears at or near the start of a word group. These fragments often lack a subject and part of the verb. An example of this type of sentence fragment is-- I spent almost two hours on the phone yesterday. Trying to find a garage to repair my car. People sometimes write ing-fragments because they think the subject in one sentence will work for the next word group as well, however, the subject I in the opening sentence will not serve as the subject for "Trying to find a garage to repair my car." To correct this ing-fragment, you need to attach the ing- fragment to the sentence that comes before it or that comes after it, whichever makes more sense. To correct the previous ing-fragment, you can write: I spent almost two hours on the phone yesterday, trying to find a garage to repair my car. Eventually, I had to have it towed to a garage in another town.

Sometimes sentence fragments can occur when sentences are started with the word to. An example of this type of sentence fragment is: I plan on working overtime. To get the job done. To correct this to-fragment mistake, connect the to-fragment to the previous sentence. I plan on working overtime to get the job done.

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Another common sentence fragment occurs when sentences lack a subject and a verb. These often occur when sentences begin with the following words: also, especially, except, for example, including, such as. An example of this type of sentence fragment is: I love to cook and eat Italian food. Especially spaghetti and lasagna. I make everything from scratch. To correct this, you need to connect the added-detail fragment to the sentence before or after it, whichever makes more sense. Example: I love to cook and eat Italian food, especially spaghetti and lasagna. I make everything from scratch. The subject and the verb from the first sentence (I love to cook and eat Italian food) will not serve as the subject for the next word group (Especially spaghetti and lasagna). You need to combine these two word groups and add a comma between the independent clause (I love to cook and eat Italian food.) and the dependent clause (especially spaghetti and lasagna).

Finally, a very common **sentence fragment** occurs when a subject is missing from the sentence. People may write missing-subject fragments because they think the subject in one sentence will apply to the next group as well. The subject, however, just as the verb, needs to be in each word group to make it a sentence. An example of a missing-subject fragment is: The truck skidded on the rain-slick highway. But missed a telephone pole on the side of the road.

To correct this missing-subject fragment, you would need to combine the two word groups. Example: The truck skidded on the rain-slick highway but missed a telephone pole on the side of the road.

Try reading your sentences aloud and listening to see if you have a subject and a verb for every sentence. Another suggestion is to read sentences separately from the last sentence in a paragraph to the first sentence so you can see if you have run thoughts together without adequate punctuation or as incomplete thoughts. Practice using correct punctuation between sentences (a period, a comma and a coordinating conjunction, or a semi-colon) and making sure all sentences have a subject, a verb, and a complete thought.